

Painting

Chapter 12



Pop Art

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Pop art is an art movement that emerged in the mid 1950s in Britain and in the late 1950s in the United States. Pop art challenged tradition by asserting that an artist's use of the mass-produced visual commodities of popular culture is contiguous with the perspective of fine art. Pop removes the material from its context and isolates the object, or combines it with other objects, for contemplation. The concept of pop art refers not as much to the art itself as to the attitudes that led to it.



Jasper Johns, *The Museum of Modern Art, New York*

Pop art employs aspects of mass culture, such as advertising, comic books and mundane cultural objects. It is widely interpreted as a reaction to the then-dominant ideas of abstract expressionism, as well as an expansion upon them. And due to its utilization of found objects and images it is similar to Dada. Pop art is aimed to employ images of popular as opposed to elitist culture in art, emphasizing the banal¹ or kitschy² elements of any given culture, most often through the use of irony. It is also associated with the artists' use of mechanical means of reproduction or rendering techniques.

Much of pop art is considered incongruent, as the conceptual practices that are often used make it difficult for some to readily comprehend. Pop art and minimalism are considered to be art movements that precede postmodern art, or are some of the earliest examples of Postmodern Art themselves.



or his *Brillo Soap Box* sculptures.

Pop art often takes as its imagery that which is currently in use in advertising. Product labeling and logos figure prominently in the imagery chosen by pop artists, like in the Campbell's Soup Cans labels, by Andy Warhol. Even the labeling on the shipping carton containing retail items has been used as subject matter in pop art, for example in Warhol's *Campbell's Tomato Juice Box* 1964,

¹ Banal- dull and unoriginal

² sentimental, tasteless or silly

The origins of pop art in North America and Great Britain developed differently. In America, it marked a return to hard-edged composition and representational art as a response by artists using impersonal, mundane reality, irony and parody to defuse the personal symbolism and "painterly looseness" of Abstract Expressionism. By contrast, the origin in post-War Britain, while employing irony and parody, was more academic with a focus on the dynamic and paradoxical imagery of American popular culture as powerful, manipulative symbolic devices that were affecting whole patterns of life, while improving prosperity of a society. Early pop art in Britain was a matter of ideas fueled by American popular culture viewed from afar, while the American artists were inspired by the experiences, of living within that culture. Similarly, pop art was both an extension and a repudiation of Dadaism. While pop art and Dadaism explored some of the same subjects, pop art replaced the destructive, satirical, and anarchic impulses of the Dada movement with detached affirmation of the artifacts of mass culture. Among those artists seen by some as producing work leading up to Pop art are Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, and Man Ray.



In the United States

Although the movement began in the late 1950s, Pop Art in America was given its greatest impetus during the 1960s. By this time, American advertising had adopted many elements and inflections of modern art and functioned at a very sophisticated level. Consequently, American



artists had to search deeper for dramatic styles that would distance art from the well-designed and clever commercial materials. As the British viewed American popular culture imagery from a somewhat removed perspective, their views were often instilled with romantic, sentimental and humorous overtones. By contrast, American artists being bombarded daily with the diversity of mass produced imagery, produced work that was generally more bold and aggressive.

Two important painters in the establishment of America's pop art vocabulary were Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. While the paintings of Rauschenberg have relationships to the earlier work of Kurt Schwitters and other

Dadaists, his concern was with social issues of the moment. His approach was to create art out of ephemeral materials and using topical events in the life of everyday America gave his work a unique quality. Johns' and Rauschenberg's work of the 1950s is classified as Neo-Dada, and is visually distinct from the classic American Pop Art which began in the early 1960s.

Of equal importance to American pop art is Roy Lichtenstein. His work probably defines the basic premise of pop art better than any other through parody. Selecting the old-fashioned comic strip as subject matter, Lichtenstein produces a hard-edged, precise composition that documents while it parodies in a soft manner.



The paintings of Lichtenstein, like those of Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann and others, share a direct attachment to the commonplace image of American popular culture, but also treat the subject in an impersonal manner clearly illustrating the idealization of mass production. Andy Warhol is probably the most famous figure in Pop Art. Warhol attempted to take Pop beyond an artistic style to a life style, and his work often displays a lack of human affectation that dispenses with the irony and parody of many of his peers.

Wayne Thiebaud (born November 15, 1920) is an American painter whose most famous works are of cakes, pastries, boots, toilets, toys and lipsticks. He is associated with the Pop art movement because of his interest in objects of mass culture, although his works, executed during the fifties and sixties, slightly predate the works of the classic pop artists. Thiebaud uses heavy pigment and exaggerated colors to depict his subjects, and the well-defined shadows characteristic of advertisements are almost always included in his work.

Thiebaud is well known for his paintings of production line objects found in diners and cafeterias, such as pies and pastries. Many wonder if he spent time working in the food industry, and in fact he did. As a young man in Long Beach, he worked at a cafe named *Mile High and Red Hot*, where "Mile High" was ice cream and "Red Hot" was a hot dog. He was associated with the Pop art painters because of his interest in objects of mass culture, however, his works, executed during the fifties and sixties, slightly predate the works of the classic pop artists, suggesting that Thiebaud may



have had an influence on the movement. Thiebaud uses heavy pigment and exaggerated colors to depict his subjects, and the well-defined shadows characteristic of advertisements are almost always included in his work.



In addition to pastries, Thiebaud has painted landscapes, streetscapes, and popular characters such as Mickey Mouse. His paintings such as *Sunset Streets* (1985) and *Flatland River* (1997) are noted for their hyper realism, and are in some ways similar to Edward Hopper's work, who was fascinated with mundane scenes from everyday American life.

In his painting, he focuses on the commonplace in a way that suggests irony and objective distance from his subjects. He also makes a

point of keeping an independent distance from the New York School.

Thiebaud considers himself not an artist, but a painter. He is a voracious reader and is known for reading poetry to his students. His favorite poet is William Carlos Williams.

Thiebaud spoke at Harvard University School of Design in 1990 where he responded to one of the student's questions, "What do you think defines an artist?" and Mr. Thiebaud responded "An artist creates his own world."



Pop Art Questions

1. Where and when did Pop Art emerge?
2. What is Pop art about? What did it try to accomplish?
3. Where does Pop art draw its inspiration from? How is this different from earlier art?
4. Pop art emphasizes the banal and the kitschy in American/British culture. What does that mean?
5. How does Pop art relate to Advertising?
6. Who created the Campbell's Soup Cans?
7. In America, pop Art was a reaction against which previous art movement?
8. How do Pop and Dada relate to each other?
9. Who are 4 of the most famous Pop artists?
10. Describe the works of Wayne Thiebaud. What is he famous for?
11. Describe his use of color, pigment and shadow.
12. According to Thiebaud, what defines an artist?